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ABSTRACT

Theory and practice, especially in education and more particularly about the composition process, stand in a dialectical relationship to one another, otherwise practice gets gimmicky and theory becomes dogmatic. The role of theory is to define purposes, figure out why something works so it can be repeated, give perspective, and free teachers from an overdependence on preparation. A theory of imagination can help teachers in teaching critical and creative writing together, reading and writing together, and to understand what it means to speak of the composing process. Composing is forming, it is a continuum and students of composition need to be helped to turn on their minds throughout the process. A theory of imagination helps teachers invent assignments appropriate to one or another phase of the composing process. (TJ)

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The Teacher as REsearcher*

[A Theory of Imagination is a Direction-finder]

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California Association of Teachers of English
February 16, 1979
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*Preferred title

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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I'm happy and proud to be here: your association exemplifies in all its activities the kind of involvement which makes our profession so lively. In my experience, it's the affiliates of the NCTE rather than the parent organization which are more likely to know how to engage in dialogue, real dialogue -- not university personnel handing down the theory and school teachers working out the practice; not ed schools doing the research and teachers providing the data. The Bay Area Writing Project is a superb example of such dialogue. What I want to suggest in these remarks is that real teachers in dialogue with one another can find directions for excellence as they work out their own theory. I will conclude with some observations about a theory of the composing process and how it can guide our teaching of writing.

My favorite text on this notion of an exchange between teachers comes from Sylvia Ashton-Warner. "The educational story," she writes in Teacher, "is like the writing of a novel. You can't be sure of your beginning until you have checked it with your ending. What might come of infant teachers visiting the university and professors visiting the infant room?" What can come of it, what has come of such visits is not "research," but useful questions and answers which can provide directions. I want to claim that what we need is not what is called "research," but the kind of theory that is generated in dialogue among teachers. When we real teachers get together, we ask one another real questions: "If language capacities are innate, why is it so hard to teach kids to write sound sentences?" "How can you

teach the use of however if they don't understand the however relationship?" I don't think real teachers ask questions like "What is the T-unit average among your 010 students?" I promise you I will be polemical for only a few minutes, but I want to rock the boat a little: finding directions always entails rocking the boat, doesn't it? (The way I handle a canoe it does.)

The notion that "research" can provide directions is absurd -- I mean the kind of research supported, for instance, by the National Institute of Education. The Institute guidelines explicitly state that NIE has no interest whatsoever in practical application: no proposals for curriculum, for course design, sequences of assignments will be entertained; attempts to define implications for the classroom are unwelcome. Instead, the guidelines announce, the Institute is concerned to establish scientific understanding, by gathering fresh data on, say, the effects of home environment on literacy. The social scientists who prepared these guidelines argue this way: Basic research is essential to the advancement of learning in physics; therefore, basic research is essential to an understanding of education. That analogy is fraudulent because education is not comparable to the natural sciences: why? Because education profoundly and essentially involves language -- and language is not a natural process but a symbolic form and a social process, thought it's contingent on natural processes. The people who call language "verbal behavior" are the ones who call literature "literary material," just as they are the ones who call making mud pies "earthplay." They are not our allies.

Let me end my polemic with this assertion: educational research is nothing to our purpose; unless we formulate the questions, if the procedures by which answers are sought are not dialectic and dialogic, that is to say, if the questions and the answers are not continually REformulated by those who are working in the classroom. My spies tell me that it's becoming harder and harder for researchers to get into the schools: I rejoice in that news because I think it might encourage teachers to become researchers themselves, and once that happens, the character of research is bound to change.

It helps to pronounce "research" the way Southerners do: REsearch. REsearch, like REcognition, is a REflexive act. It means looking -- and looking again. This new kind of REsearch would not mean going out after new "data," but REconsidering what is at hand. REsearch would come to mean looking and looking again at what happens in the English classroom. We do not need new information; we need to think about the information we have. We need to interpret what goes on when students respond to one kind of assignment and not to another, or when some respond to an assignment and others do not. We need to interpret things like that -- and then to interpret things like that -- and then to interpret our interpretations. There is nothing in the NIE guidelines which suggests that anybody in Washington has ever heard of the idea of thinking about thinking. Maybe they'd listen if we reminded them of what Piaget once observed (Piaget is, of course, a hot item just now). Piaget remarked that "To understand is to invent." What we need is not research designed for us by the National Science Foundation,

as Professor Hirsch is suggesting, but questions we can invent about what we think we are doing, questions which will help us, too, in devising the criteria for evaluating what we are getting. Inventing as a way of understanding is a truth known to poets as well as to cognitive psychologists. A version of that dialectic is the one we all know concerning the composing process: you can't really know what you mean until you hear what you say. In my opinion, theory and practice should stand in this same relationship to one another, a dialectical relationship: theory and practice need one another.

The way to get them together is to begin with them together. Only that way will we be able to judge the degree to which what we meant to do is matched by what we did. The primary role of theory is to guide us in defining our purposes and thus in evaluating our efforts in realizing them. How can we know what we're doing, how can we find out where we're going, if we don't have a conception of what we think we're doing? This is not, however, the same thing as stating behavioral objectives. They can forestall our ideas by constraining us too soon, too rigidly. But to be wary of behavioral objectives is not to settle for the visionary. Of course we must have plans, but they should not be narrowly defined in ways meant to make it easy for the researchers to quantify.

The trouble with behavioral objectives is that they are not meant to be modified by our practice; they control what we do (three sentence patterns by October.) Rather, the primary use of theory should be to define what our

purposes and aims are and thereby how to evaluate our efforts in reaching them: what and thereby how. I don't think there's anything more important for us to remember than that connector thereby: we have to keep the what and the how together -- the what are we doing? together with the how do we do it? and the how did it go? and the how did it work? Evaluation, in other words, should be considered as an aspect of method. Let me tell you about the experience of a friend of mine.

(An account of how procedures were worked out by Brenda S. Engel, currently of Wesley College, whereby the then new program of the Cambridge Alternate School could be evaluated by appropriate criteria. The emphasis was on observation in the classroom and a way of coding kinds and modes of learning was developed. A new program cannot be judged in terms appropriate for the one it is intended to supplant.)

Theory can help us judge what's going on and it can also explain why something works. Suppose you look at a particular exercise which has been very successful and you say "Terrific! Now I'll do this." And you follow X with Y, which seems appropriate, and it doesn't work. If you don't have a theory about why X worked, you won't have any way of defining the real relationship of X to Y, logically or psychologically. Taking my cue from Sylvia Ashton-Warner, let me tell you about an incident described by Patricia Carini, a teacher and researcher in New England.

> (An account of a teacher's observation of her class of youngsters at the sandtable. They were filling coffee cans and strawberry boxes with damp sand, inverting them to make, she thought, towers and houses, sheds and factories. "They're making cities!" So she took them on a field trip to a nearby town, as the follow-up; the students were unimpressed, uninterested.)

Patricia Carini's analysis was as follows: those kids weren't making towns; they weren't into architecture! They were forming: they were playing with shapes, moulded shapes, and what should have followed that -- and what should have followed that -- and what did follow successfully, after consultation with the teacher -- was playing in empty packing cases. The children went from compact, thingy shapes to empty, explorable shapes with different kinds of limits; they went from one kind of forming to another, from manipulating a shape to being shaped.

Theory can help us figure out why something works so we can repeat it, inventing variations. A theoretical understanding of cognitive development in this case, of how learning involves forming, can help us figure out our sequences of assignments. The centrally important question in all teaching is "What comes next?" We must learn continually how to build on what has gone before, how to devise what I.A. Richards calls "the partially parallel task." Of course, we follow something with something else like it, but we can't do that authentically unless we can identify that first something: What is really going on? Theory can help us see what act we're trying to follow.

Theory gives us perspective; just as it allows us to determine sequences, it saves us from too much particularity. Teachers have to be pragmatic; they have to be down-to-earth, but being down to earth without knowing the theoretical coordinates for the landscape is a good way to lose your sense of direction. We English teachers are given to recipe swapping -- and that can be hazardous. In my ideal commonwealth, the first thing that would happen -- of course ideal commonwealths are really dictatorships: in my ideal commonwealth, I would order the closing down of the Exercise Exchange; the NCTE would not be allowed to operate it, unless they instituted a Theory Exchange. And you couldn't get a recipe unless you also went there. I have a friend in the Denver schools who does just that. When her colleagues say "Oh, that sounds wonderful! Can I have that exercise?" she says "Sure -- but you have to take the theory too." And the exercise comes

typed up with a little theoretical statement at the top, an explanation of whatever aspect or function of learning the assignment is meant to exercise. That combination of theory and practice can help prevent what so often happens: you know how it is; it's certainly happened to me. You hear something described that sounds good; it's obviously foolproof; you try it, and it doesn't work. So you feel terrible because this great exercise is a proved success -- and you flubbed it. By reminding us that reading and writing happen in contexts -- social, political, psychological -- which can set up static ruinous to the reception of the very best assignments, theory can save us from wasting time blaming ourselves or our students.

By reminding us of contexts, theory can free us from an overdependence on preparation, reminding us, too, that the alternative to the immutable lesson plan is not the bull session. Those of you who have taught more than a year know about this -- or maybe more than a week. But there is nothing more typical of the inexperienced teacher -- is there? -- than total preparation in which every five minutes is scheduled. Anxiety overloads the circuit. Over-preparation forecloses the possibility of responding to what John Donne calls "emergent occasions." The publishers and the educational establishment want to allay that anxiety, but their prescription is a medicine that's worse than the trouble it's meant to cure. Tight schedules, leakproof syllabi, the instructor's manual, and the gilt-edged study guide are all agencies by which "extension" supplants "communication": those are Paulo Freire's terms. In Education for Critical Consciousness, Freire speaks of the agricultural extension service in Brazil

as being antithetical to the communication by which learning is truly effected. The peasants don't learn from someone extending a service to them. Nor do students. I remember as a most depressing experience indeed being shown the way literature is taught in the Boston High Schools. The head of the English department showed me proudly the guide which was provided for every teacher -- a loose-leaf notebook, designed so that it could lie flat unobtrusively in front of the teacher, our of sight of the class, between the teacher and the text: the same principle as reading a comic book with The Return of the Native propped up in front. For each poem, there was provided a page of questions -- all variations on the primeval query: "What is the author trying to say?" And with answers! Nothing can kill a class sooner than to ask a question to which there is a pre-fabricated answer. Of course, using somebody else's list of questions and answers is worse, but I think asking your own, without being able to accommodate the response you get, is almost as bad. I'm not telling you anything you don't know; I simply want to re-state the home truths in the context of remarks on the uses of theory.

But the fear of losing control is very real: having an agenda is, after all, a pretty good defense, if that's what we want. When I first taught I certainly wanted a defense against the possibility that the class or the text would get out of control, or out of my control. And, of course, there were very important facts about Beowulf that I wanted them to have. When somebody would ask a question which got me off the track, I was very upset. But back I would go to the agenda, my security blanket. Within a

week, I had discovered that what was really interesting was what happened when we talked with one another about emergent questions. I learned to come to class, not thinking of a territory to be covered, but with a compass -- a metaphor, or a juxtaposition, or a question from the class before. In my experience, that's a lesson that is never finally learned; I have to learn it all over again, every time I design a new course. I want to say "LISTEN to all this fascinating stuff I've just learned about linguistics--" and I proceed with my own order. Only when I really start hearing the questions or eliciting the real ones does the class take on direction, whether towards excellence or not is problematic, but the point is that the show is on the road.

You probably know the story of the first years of Bruner's curriculum, Man: A Course of Study.

> (An account of how teachers were prepared to teach the new course, studying the scientific background implicit in the lessons. The course was enormously interesting to students who raised dozens of questions, the answers to which the teachers did not have. They complained to the course designers who then offered a refresher course ("Do flies have muscles?"). They returned to their classrooms--and to dozens of other unanswerable questions.)

And finally everyone saw that what was needed was to learn a stance, a way of handling any question in dialogue.

That's a good example, I think, of how theory and practice and evaluation can all work together, can all be brought together: unless this happens, practice gets gimmicky and theory becomes dogmatic and evaluation stays in the hands of the Board of Education. The initiation of the Teacher as REsearcher could be the ritual burning of all instructors' manuals, and the students could ceremoniously toss on the bonfire their study guides and their yellow felt markers. I tell my students that my course is an anti-Evelyn Wood course in how to slow down your reading, in order to speed it up eventually.

I've reached the point now at which Cicero suggests that the orator should begin to say in conclusion: I'm two thirds through. I want to spend the rest of my time suggesting how theory can help us teach composition.

The theory we need in that endeavour is a theory of the imagination. Imagination is the conceptual bridge from English to the real world because it is, in Coleridge's resonant phrase "the prime agent of all human perception." Constructing and construing, writing and reading and perceiving are all acts of interpretation. In my textbook, I have experimented with ways in which we might reclaim the imagination as a concept which will help us get the affective and the cognitive together, not partitioned in their separate domains or in their separate brain halves. Educators tend to associate imagination with Friday afternoon projects and courses not in the

core, with the un-intellectual, the non-cognitive, the merely personal expression of merely personal experience. But imagination is properly a name for the active mind, the mind of the child making forms in sand, the artist making forms in granite: Dame Barbara Hepworth, the British sculptor, speaks of her left hand as her "thinking" hand; the right is only the motor hand, the hand that holds the mallet. Her thinking hand finds the form in the stone. Not her "inspirational" or her genius hand or her "creative" hand: her thinking hand. Thinking is not the province of the logician alone. If we can keep thinking and creating together, I don't think there will be any difficulty finding directions. A theory of imagination could guide us in teaching critical and creative writing together, reading and writing together, and most importantly, it could help us to understand what it really means to speak of the composing process.

Composing is forming: it is a continuum; it goes on all the time. Composing is what the mind does by nature: composing is the function of the active mind. Composing is the way we make sense of the world: it's our way of learning.

Here's what Gordon Allport has to say about learning: "Whatever else learning may be, it is surely a disposition to form structures." Our chief resource as teachers of composition is right there: it is the mind's disposition to form structures, to compose.

Now what are the pedagogical implications? If composing begins with birth, if composing is making sense of the world and that's what the mind

does, and if this composing is a continuum, then whatever is fundamental to perception is also fundamental to conception, to concept formation: a theory of imagination would remind us to provide occasions for lots of perception, for lots of looking at things, for observation. Perception is the other side of concept formation. We don't have to teach that, thank the Lord; thank the Lord for that, because the human mind is created as a composer: by means of language we construe each particular thing as a symbol for that kind of thing. When we see a lamb, we simultaneously see that lamb and that lamb as a kind of thing. That's what it means to say that man is the animal symbolicum, the symbol-making animal. When we teach perception -- but of course we don't do that: when we discourage observation, looking and looking again, we're not teaching some merely preliminary thing. (When do we get to "real" writing?) When we offer what I call, after I.A. Richards, "assisted invitations" to students to use their minds in looking at things, we're also exercising the capacity to form concepts. Perception is not something that comes first and then we get to ideas; perception is itself a construing, an interpretation, a making of meaning, a composing.

We let students of composition do a lot of looking -- not because we want detail for detail's sake, not because we are committed to "Show, Don't Tell," but because looking, seeing, turns on the mind. When we encourage our students to look and look again, we are not differentiating creative and critical writing which should be kept together, just as composing and editing should be kept apart. In practicing close observation

and critical response, students of composition can raise their consciousness of themselves as composers -- that process which Paulo Friere calls "conscientization," a process involving a community of observer-critics, of responsive audiences and purposeful writers. Students of composition who do a lot of looking will learn that perspective and context are essential to critical and creative thinking: they will be exercising the form finding and form creating power -- the imagination.

A theory of imagination helps us invent assignments appropriate to one or another phase of the composing process. It can do that by reminding us that composing is forming and that forms don't come out of the air. Now English teachers have recently re-discovered that fact. In the past seven or eight years, with the help of Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie especially, we have learned to recognize the role of free writing in the forming which is composing. But I've been noticing recently that as this fundamental idea becomes accepted more widely, it becomes less well-defined; as it is institutionalized, free writing is often just a faddish name for the old method it was meant to replace. In the preface to a writing lab manual for tutors we read that the chief purpose of pre-writing is for the student to get his thesis statement and to learn to outline! QUOTE from the section called "Pre-writing": "The standard outline is still the best method to help students overcome organizational problems." Of course if students knew how to outline, they wouldn't have any organizational problems to overcome! And if they can outline right off the bat, then they don't need prewriting because they will already know what they have to say. Someone who knows exactly what he wants to say without any preliminary forming: that's a fair definition of a <u>hack</u>.

The concept of pre-writing as a necessary phase in the composing process is disappearing before our very eyes because there has been no theoretical understanding of the role it plays; I mean any philosophical understanding. The psychological rationale is obvious: it relaxes you; it gives you something other than the blank page to confront and thus can allay anxiety; it can explode one kind of writer's block. The philosophical rationale for pre-writing is not often articulated. Let me try:

Learning to make pre-writing a phase of the composing process and not just a five-finger exercise, a warm up -- though it is that too -- means learning the uses of chaos. The reason that free writing, listing, and other modes of pre-writing can lead to something else is that the seemingly shapeless, seemingly random words, the images and phrases and fragments are stand-ins for fuller statements, for relationships, for assertions and questions. They are proto-sentences and paragraphs-in-utero. The conventional wisdom of most schools of psychology cannot explain that: no theory of verbal behavior can account for that power of words, but a philosophy of language as symbolic form can, and so can a theory of imagination as the forming power.

Our students, because they are language animals, because they have the power of naming, can generate choas; they can find ways out of chaos because language creates them. Language is itself the great heuristic

words come into being as verbal generalization: any name implies generalization and as students look again at chaos they can see it happen. Words cluster because they belong together -- and sentences can be composed that name that relationship. Clusters of words turn into syntax: it is the discursive character of language, its tendency to "run along" -- and that's what discourse means -- language's tendency to be syntactical brings thought along with it. It is the discursive, generalizing, forming power of language which makes meanings from chaos, which makes pre-writing not <u>just</u> preliminary.

Jean Pumphrey's scatter poems demonstrate this power of language to shape meanings. Kenneth Koch's syntactic structures and "poetry ideas," as he calls his rhetorical forms, are what generate the poetry he gets from his youngsters. Any transforming exercise can demonstrate the power of language to make new meanings. Here's a passage from a report written for the Materials and Soils Program of the Division of Highways in Pierre, South Dakota. It's written as a poem called "Observations":

Some areas of the upper depositions
of Pierre Shale are fractured
and lie in jointed platy layers.
Surface water tends
to accumulate
and build up perched water tables in the roadbeds.
The platy layers are dyked off
by impervious shale beds
and have no free drainage outlets.

A large water-fed slide
on old U.S. 16
required many thousands of yards of material
to hold the toe of a berm.
On the interstate near Waste, South Dakota
water problems developed which caused
much differential heaving.

I think this represents something of what I.A. Richards meant when he spoke once of "poetry as an instrument of research."

Students can learn to write by learning the uses of chaos, which is to say, re-discovering the power of language to generate meanings. Our job is to design sequences of assignments which let them discover what language can do, what they can do with language.

Our students can learn to write only if we give them back their language, and that means playing with it, working with it, using it instrumentally, making many starts. We want them to learn the truth of Gaston Bachelard's observation that "in the realm of the mind, to begin is to know you have the right to begin again. If our students are to learn the uses of chaos, we will have to learn ways of teaching them to tolerate ambiguity and to be patient with their beginnings -- which should never be graded: identifying mistakes is irrelevant when we are teaching how to begin the process of making meanings. And when we do come to respond to compositions, our comments should continue the dialogue which has been formed in the writer's mind, transformed in his dialogue on paper. As

Josephine Miles has suggested, our comments can most usefully take the form of a question: "The main point seems to be X; your supporting statements are here, here, and here; if this is so, why is that paragraph where it is?" "The main idea of this paper is X; the main steps of its development are here, and here and here: how then does paragraph 4 fit in, and what transitional connective term would be helpful?"

A theory of the imagination, I've been arguing, can guide us in teaching composition as a dialectical process -- not a linear, one-way street. In my book, I compare the composer to a sheep dog. A colleague who's using the book told me that nobody knew what a sheep dog ~~was~~ is like, but the fact that it is ~~was~~ NOT like a tractor got across! Our assignments should be appropriate to all that running about, that hithering and thithering of the sheep dog: short papers, long papers, throw away papers, one sentence written ten different ways -- ten different intentions written in one sentence pattern; papers written out of class, papers in class, papers to be forgotten, papers to be revised and edited. Surely, teaching from the perspective of a theory of imagination could help us separate composing and editing. Keats couldn't spell for a hot egg!

IN CONCLUSION, I want you to hear a paragraph written by a seventh grader in a remedial class in the Massachusetts town bearing the wonderfully emblematic name of Braintree. His teacher, my student, Mrs. Paula Girouard-McCann, who'd been reading George Hillocks' little NCTE pamphlet, "Observing and Writing," brought in a bag of marbles and told her class that they could write about whatever they wanted to about how the marble looked to

them, and that they were not to worry about grammar and spelling.

> A marble is round and made out of glass. When you drop it, it makes a trickle sound. Inside there are little marbles that look like bubbles from a splash in the water. If you think hard enough while your looking in, you can see what you are thinking. Most marbles are see-through. If you whip it down on the ground, it might smash into tiny little pieces. When you put a marble up to a window, you can see your image upside down instead of right side up. It is like an eye whithout a mirror or diaphragm. It looks like there are tiny scratches all over it; but when you feel it, it feels like there are none at all. When you think of it in science terms, you can see parameciums and many other different microrganisms. If you think of it in social science terms, you think of who invented glass and who thought of marbles. If you think of it in math terms, you notice how perfectly round it is. If you think of it in English terms, you can write about it and tell of all the ways it was made, the roundness of it, the science about it, and how you can tell all the ways about a little marble and all the wonders.

I had planned to end with a long passage from Coleridge on the imagination, but I think the seventh grader looking at the marble is better: everything we need to know about composing as a continuum of forming, thinking, and writing is caught in the boy's sentence:

> If you think hard enough while your looking in,
>
> you can see what you are thinking.